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TAGS: [JO](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#)
SUBJECT: WHY JORDAN'S ISLAMISTS LOST GROUND IN
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REF: A. AMMAN 4623
[1](#)B. AMMAN 4612
[1](#)C. AMMAN 4621
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Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF) party suffered a crippling defeat in the November 20 parliamentary elections. As Jordan's political landscape realigns, the IAF is spinning its defeat several ways in the media. It is joined by the chattering classes, who have their own theories about the party's demise. The IAF insists that, despite its electoral defeat, it not only retains staunch support, but in fact continues to represent popular Jordanian views. While the IAF has had some success in its effort to call into question the validity of the balloting, Jordanian commentators are speculating about a variety of possible explanations, including internal divisions (or even a boycott from within), the IAF's support for Hamas, and weakness on bread and butter issues like the economy. All of these theories have a grain of truth, and the true reality likely is a combination of all these factors. Regardless, the IAF's poor showing has emboldened the regime to press ahead aggressively with its reform agenda. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The Islamic Action Front (IAF) emerges from the November 20 parliamentary elections a wounded party - though it still remains the only significant party presence in the parliament. Its representation in Jordan's 110-seat lower house of parliament dropped from seventeen to only six seats, with one other independent member with close ties to the IAF. Following internal disagreements, pre-election posturing between factions within the IAF, and an 11th-hour intervention by former PM Marouf Bakhit, the party nominated twenty-two candidates, generally regarded as moderates. Most observers assumed that this list would attract the core of the party's base and be able to compete for votes outside of the few thousand MB grassroots activists. Expectations for the IAF's representation in the upcoming parliament ranged between 14-17 seats. Thus the IAF's stunning defeat left the party, the media and analysts scrambling to explain why it performed so poorly.

[1](#)3. (C) While the dust from the November 20 election is still settling, there seem to be three general currents in the analysis and posturing: (1) society is turning away from today's IAF; (2) IAF internal squabbles and resulting poor campaign management doomed them to failure; and (3) accusations (almost exclusively from the IAF) that the government successfully stacked the deck against the Islamic movement.

Theory One: Jordanians Turning Away from IAF

14. (C) The most straightforward explanation is the apparent turning away of Jordanian society from today's IAF; that the IAF has genuinely lost popularity because the Islamist option, as offered by the MB during the past year, is not selling well. In this interpretation, the IAF's perceived support of the Hamas takeover and Palestinian-on-Palestinian violence in Gaza - and the IAF's inability to provide services, jobs and an improved living standard - gave the Jordanian public an emotional (Gaza) and practical (services) reason not to vote for IAF candidates.

The Hamas Effect

15. (SBU) Several commentators and contacts were quick to argue that the IAF is still suffering from its public and private support for Hamas (Ref E). On November 23, Al-Ghad Chief Editor Ayman Al-Safadi wrote that "the extent of (the IAF's) relationship with the Hamas movement" was the major reason for its electoral defeat, and expressed his hope that the elections will send a clear message to the party to distance itself from Gaza politics.

16. (SBU) Ad-Dustour columnist Oraib Rantawi went a step further, attributing the IAF's defeat to a broader anti-Islamist wave that is sweeping over the Middle East in reaction to the "destructive performance" of militant groups. After Jordan's 9-11 (9 November 2005) when terrorists attacked three hotels and killed 60 Jordanians, Jordanian society's antipathy toward extremism and movements perceived

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to be close to extremism grew exponentially. The IAF was also caught up in that wave of anti-extremist sentiment. Rantawi wrote, in reaction to the election results, that the IAF's position "is just like Hamas in Palestine. It is neither capable of exercising its new role as an opposition movement nor capable of relinquishing the long-standing alliance and strategic partnership with the Jordanian political regime. It's neither capable of maintaining the dovish walk which it has adopted for years nor capable of imitating the hawkish leaps."

IAF's Failure to Deliver

17. (C) Some commentators are repeating a message we heard from several candidates on the campaign trail - that the IAF lost seats because it performed poorly in parliament (Ref B) and failed to energize its base. "The Jordanian people want to try other politicians, because the Islamists' programs have not achieved anything," said journalist Sultan Al-Hattab on a post-election Al-Jazeera talk show. Al-Ghad columnist Jamil Al-Nimri agreed, saying that the Islamists lacked a real connection with their supporters, and failed to produce an agenda that mattered to voters. Fellow Al-Ghad columnist Mohammed Abu-Rumman agreed, saying that the IAF "totally failed to present a persuasive political discourse" and failed to transcend "the pompous slogans that people got fed up with...and (which) do not epitomize citizens' concerns and their difficult economic conditions."

18. (C) There is also an argument that voters recognized that IAF members in parliament would not - and could not - have the same effectiveness in securing jobs and services in their districts as non-IAF candidates, due to the IAF's poor relations with the government over the past year. While "Islam is the Solution" might attract the hearts of voters, the party program and past performance did not put the proverbial bread on the table as people's living standards, especially in the IAF strongholds in big cities, continued to drop or at best stagnate.

Theory Two: A House Divided Cannot Stand

¶9. (SBU) Another take on the IAF's defeat was that internal splits and campaign blunders caused the party to essentially defeat itself (Ref A), as it alienated some of its base and potential "swing" voters, such as there are in Jordan. Dhunaybat said that "before taking anyone to account, the movement should take its own self to account." Al-Ghad columnist Abu-Rumman linked the issue of an internal split with the taint of the Hamas issue: "Those who should be accountable (for the IAF's loss) are the Muslim Brothers who peddled and promoted accusations against the moderates through writers, hired pens, and papers known for their leanings, which continued to spread lies about the moderate leaders and their alleged relationship with the state and their unfriendliness to Hamas. Those writers and journalists are known for their relationship with the Hamas political bureau."

¶10. (SBU) Then there is speculation that "hawks" in the party, put off by the moderate candidate list, boycotted the vote. Post-election commentary from Al-Arab Al-Yawm columnist Nabil Al-Ghisan posited out that the "hawks" within the IAF "rejected the party's list and worked to abort it from within." The IAF has responded with vitriol, issuing a press statement denying any such boycott, and urging party members "not to heed the wickedness of the wicked and the suspicious whispering of the hypocrites."

¶11. (SBU) Key figures in the MB and IAF have been filling the airwaves with denials of any internal split. MB Controller General and perceived leader of the dovish faction Salim Al-Falahat, in a post-election interview in the IAF mouthpiece weekly Al-Sabil, said, "some people want to cover up for the government by claiming that there are differences within our ranks that had influenced our chances of winning. The fact is that the existence of differences is a normal thing. There were numerous opinions concerning participation in the elections... However, when we adopted a decision, everybody abided by it. We saw this commitment in that some of those who were for boycotting the elections worked hard for the candidates of the Islamic movement. Besides, the differences in views confirm the strength and maturity of the Islamic movement."

¶12. (SBU) Despite these denials, turnout figures in IAF stronghold districts do suggest that many IAF supporters did not vote (Ref H). The heavily IAF first district of Zarqa,

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where two IAF candidates were running, saw a meager thirty percent turnout. Likewise, Zarqa's fourth district (which includes large refugee populations in Ruseifa and where one IAF candidate was running), saw thirty-one percent turnout. In contrast, the more tribal areas of Zarqa's second and third districts, which combined had only one IAF candidate, had turnout numbers of fifty and sixty-one percent, respectively - nearly double the turnout rate for IAF stronghold areas. It is impossible, however, to conclude whether low turnout was the result of an organized but silent boycott, or genuine alienation by the IAF of its voters - and the IAF isn't telling.

Campaign Blunders

¶13. (C) The IAF may also have made some basic campaign blunders in recent months. According to some post contacts, the IAF withdrawal from the July 31 municipal elections at noon on election day sent a message that the movement was not serious about helping its constituents (i.e., by wielding municipal power on their behalf), and was only interested in seeking power. Analysts from the International Republican Institute also believe the MB/IAF erred by taking its urban

seats for granted and pouring resources into smaller cities and rural districts such Karak and Tafilah - where they won one seat, but perhaps at the cost of some expected wins in Amman, Irbid and Zarqa. They were shut out in Irbid and Zarqa, cities which gave them five seats in the previous parliament.

Theory Three: Election Engineering by the Government

¶14. (SBU) The IAF's line, of course, is that the government rigged the election against them. IAF leaders set the table in the run-up to the polling, with IAF Secretary General Zaki Bani Irsheid telling the press that "The Prime Minister spoke on preparations to hold fair elections. However, all this talk is only promises and we want factual proof. Indications in this regard are regrettably not encouraging." On Election Day the party worked to position itself to undermine the perceived legitimacy of the vote by criticizing the governments conduct of the election as early as 10 AM. Two days after the polling, the IAF declared that "practices in many election districts conflict with the government's pledges to conduct fair and transparent elections" and that "such practices throughout Election Day confirm that government officials and election committees are trying to change vote results." Speaking on Al-Jazeera on November 23, Deputy Controller General of the IAF Jamil Abu-Bakr said that "an open process of rigging (was) conducted by the same government" that skewed the results of the municipal elections. Another IAF official stated on Al-Jazeera that "tens of thousands of Jordanians" witnessed government tampering with election results.

¶15. (C) However, the IAF has yet to succeed broadly in its campaign to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election results. Despite IAF spin efforts, the perception of electoral improprieties is not nearly as widespread or credible as that following the July municipal election (Ref G). Some commentators have bought in to the theory. Al-Arab Al-Yawm columnist Fahd Al-Khitan said that "the decisive factor that broke the back of the Islamists was the phenomenon of vote transfers" (Ref C) and accused pro-government candidates of buying votes so as to defeat the IAF (Ref D). Most, however, while criticizing malfeasance and decrying vote-buying, have rejected the idea that this was a systematic, government-driven effort. The IAF's argument is considerably weakened by the fact that, while civil society organizations that monitored the elections have reported incidents of voting improprieties, they have not corroborated IAF charges that the government was responsible for systemic electoral violations. Ad-Dustour columnist Basim Sakkijha added a coda to the debate by noting that "this does not mean that the state's active organs did not create a political ambience that is hostile to the Islamists in the street, but this remains permissible in the political game."

Down or Out?

¶16. (SBU) The IAF is spinning energetically in its effort to regain the upper hand following this significant defeat, both by castigating the government and denying that the results mean much anyway. Falahat told the MB's organ Al-Sabil on November 27 that "no real elections were held in Jordan," the government had targeted the Islamic movement at the expense

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of the higher interests of the country, and asserted that the popularity of the Islamic movement was on the upswing. Former Controller General of the IAF Abdulmajid Al-Dhunaybat said on November 27 that: "The Islamic movement lost some seats. However, I do not believe that it regressed as far as its status in public opinion and the respect of the people for it. It is better for the movement to have six active deputies that carry out their patriotic and ideological roles

and that can do so with God's assistance rather than to have fifteen deputies that do not perform such a role and duty."

Comment

¶17. (C) The various explanations being bandied about are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There is little to no evidence that the government directly interfered in the election, but it certainly contributed to a political environment in which the Islamists were seen as outsiders. Many Jordanians may well be turned off by the IAF's support for Hamas, while others may have been alienated by the IAF's effort to square the circle by nominating moderates. And in the end, even the IAF has suggested that its representatives in the previous parliament were not effective.

¶18. (C) The true extent of popular affinity for the MB has long been a source of speculation. The MB itself has at most a few thousand members, but popular support for the IAF is often estimated in the 30 percent range. There are also few alternatives to the IAF beyond independent candidates with tribal and familial affiliations - and in Jordan, these affiliations are strong. Even so, two consecutive election defeats and a lack of visible solidarity with the IAF's claims of government rigging suggest that the IAF has lost real ground. And regardless of the reasons for the IAF's defeat, its reduced presence in the coming parliament has emboldened the King and reformist elements within Jordan's government (Ref F). The ball is now in the IAF's court. Will it wallow in internal strife or try to bring its supporters back into the fold? In the absence of clarity regarding which supporters abandoned the IAF on game day, harsh anti-government rhetoric could be just as much of a hindrance as a help. The opening session of parliament on December 2 will offer a first look into the post-election direction that the party is taking, although the IAF issued a shot across the bow November 26 when IAF Deputy Secretary General Rahil al-Gharaibeh accused the new "neo-liberal" cabinet of "forging the will of the citizens, forfeiting their freedoms, and controlling their livelihood." It is too early to judge whether there is a permanent split in the movement - a possibility raised by contacts to poloffs in the run-up to the November 20 vote - but the election has certainly started a period of introspection and rebuilding for the party.

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